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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses public policies in Portugal that call for partnerships in education to provide preschool education for all children. Preschool education is envisioned as a first step on the path towards a strong, humane society. A new role is foreseen for the State, involving fewer direct services and less bureaucratic administration, but providing more efficient supervision, with a regulating and compensatory role. The role of the Law for Preschool Education and the Plan for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education in defining both the goals of preschool education and the role of curriculum guidelines are discussed. The article notes the creation of an Office for the Expansion and Development of Preschool Education. The importance of teachers and in-service training in improving preschool education is also considered. (JPB)

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Preschool Education in Portugal: Development, Innovation and changes -Will we be able to cross the bridge?-

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> *É uma ponte de sonho que te lanço.*
> *Passa por ela, irmão.*
> *(Miguel Torga)*

Education became a priority for the Government elected on October 6, 1995, in Portugal. **An Educational Agreement** was presented to the Parliament and to social partners in May 1996, as an invitation to all - public, private entities, etc. - to join efforts for the improvement of the quality of the Portuguese educational system. The point of departure of the Educational Agreement is that education is everybody's responsibility. The challenge is to create bridges.

Among other strategic goals, the Government wants to expand preschool education within a few years up to 90% of five years olds, 75% of four years olds, and 60% of three years old . All partners were invited to join efforts for this expansion project. Preschool education in seen as the first stage of basic education, as a foundational structure and a scaffold for

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lifelong learning. Preschool education is also seen in close connection with elementary education and also with special education: the educational problems of our country cannot be solved unless the quality of education is high at both the preschool and elementary level, and also provides education for special needs. Preschool education is seen also as a service to families.

We consider that adult education has strong connections with preschool education. Good quality preschool education may become a provocation for adult development (parents, teachers, community agencies, authorities, etc.) if they become involved in the planning, creation and development of effective preschool programs, that is to say, if they become co-constructors of quality programs. Preschool education is understood to be an imperative and a cultural necessity, not just a social necessity. By cultural necessity it is understood the capability for lifelong learning, for aesthetical appreciation, for intellectual curiosity. Preschool education is envisioned as a first step on the path towards a more humane society.

A new role is foreseen for the State: a better state, providing less direct services, having a less bureaucratic administration, but providing a more efficient supervision, with a regulating and a compensatory role. The **regulating role** means creating legislation, providing technical and pedagogical support, creating a system of inspection; **better supervision** means to put in place assessment and evaluation through a systematic inspection system; the **coordination provision** means the constant monitoring of the system so as to render possible the compensatory role of the state and the development of the public network as standard; the **compensatory role** means that the state should give a special and more

direct attention to isolated and socially deprived areas, to regions where there is risk of school exclusion (and social exclusion), on school failure.

The Law for Preschool Education (Law 5/97), recently approved by the Parliament, establishes a principle of single unified pedagogical supervision under the Ministry of Education, with the reinforcement of assessment and inspection.

As the **Plan for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education** concludes, the Government proposes "a project that can become a true mobilizing contract. Through the harmonization of initiatives, efforts, energies, good will, through a healthy sense of citizenship and social participation, this project is possible. The role of the state is to regulate, to coordinate and to guarantee for carrying out of equitable goals which can correct social inequality. The role of the civil society is to initiate, to propose, to innovate and to articulate efforts through creative and participatory dynamics" (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The Plan for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education invites several ministries to articulate their efforts: the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security; the Ministry of Planning and Administration; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Culture. A tapestry of Ministries joining efforts and energies.

A very important partner for the expansion of the public preschool system is the Association of Portuguese Municipalities. Negotiations with this Association are underway and an agreement was signed. Other important partners are the Association of Private non-profit Organizations and the Association of Private and Cooperative Schools. Parent

Associations, Teacher Unions and Teacher Associations should also be involved as partners in this Expansion Plan.

The Public Law on Preschool Education sees the aims of preschool education as providing the child with a rich group experience, with intellectually stimulating activities within a safe, predictable and structured environment. The child will learn the social knowledge skills needed to interact with the others, especially those who are "different" or marked by social exclusion. Among other goals preschool education attempts to develop in the child a positive sense of himself with curiosity for the surrounding world in the recognition for different forms of life and culture, creating a sense that school is a place for multiple learning opportunities. It aims to develop critical thinking and active learning by proactive problem solving, bringing the child to cultural and aesthetical appreciation. Preschool education aims at providing children with motivation to use multiple languages and among them reading and writing. It aims also at giving an education for health and for protecting the environment, giving first-hand experiences with the physical world. Finally, it aims at educating children for citizenship and "democratic participation" at their age level.

Educating for citizenship and for "democratic participation" from an early age is seen as a crucial goal for Portuguese early childhood education. Educating for citizenship must become a "reference knowledge" for all students in basic education, starting at the early years. The Law recognizes also the possibility for different modalities of preschool education as a response to contextual diversity.

Curriculum Guidelines are seen as an important part of the regulatory role of the state in order to provide educational quality to all

preschool programs. Therefore a whole process was developed throughout last school year trying to create the document in a participatory way. These Curriculum Guidelines are an expression of professional knowledge about the field and a statement of what should children learn in preschool. The Curriculum Guidelines were sent to all public and private kindergartens in September 1997.

In order to coordinate all the initiatives for the development of preschool education an inter-ministerial **Office for the Expansion and Development of Preschool Education** was created in August 1996 involving staff from the Ministry of Education and from the Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security. This Office is coordinated by myself and aims at conceptualizing the plans of action of the "Program for Expansion and Development of Preschool Education", namely to produce legislation; to develop proposals for pedagogical intervention, such as the curriculum guidelines; to create incentives to innovative programs, training and research programs in connection with other services and entities, for the improvement of the whole network of kindergartens.

This Office has been working in close connection with a consulting board with representatives of the different social partners and educational researchers.

We have been working using what I call a "Large Table approach" (Vasconcelos, 1995). It is approach that is collaborative, decentralized, where we all can contribute in unique ways. We work usually around a Large Table, and it is the first time that people from different ministries can find joint strategies, preparing together legislation. We want "to be central but invisible" (Donaldson). We believe that flexibility and

interdisciplinarity are the only way to face reality. We work in this "invisible centrality" around our Large Table so that we make possible the dream of developing and expanding preschool education in Portugal. I consider that this new, collaborative, invisible but central way of working, is a feminine way of envisioning administrative tasks. It is, to my opinion, the only way to carry out this challenging project.

A final word about teachers. No high quality plan for the expansion of preschool education will be possible without a clear investment in the early childhood professional. She (he) must be, above all, dignified in her work. The early childhood professional has pedagogical autonomy in her/his activity and has the responsibility for the organization of educational activities. She/he has the right to a career, which means stages, formation, an ethical commitment. We have been influencing the political powers so as to recognize the urgent need for training at university level for the early childhood educators. The Comprehensive Law of the Educational System has recently been changed and all teachers, whether they teach at preschool, primary, intermediate or secondary level, they all undergo four years of training. Until recently preschool and primary school teachers had only three years training.

We need to provide consistent in-service training for all preschool teachers from public and private entities. We envision in-service training center-based, contextualized, stimulating research and innovation programs. Special incentives are being prepared for teachers working in deprived areas or in very isolated areas, so that the best are encouraged to work with the children in most need.

Portuguese Government wants to invest in preschool education as a first step for lifelong learning. Preschool education is the foundational structure, the scaffold for the building to become harmonious and well inscribed in the landscape. Our children have the right to high quality preschool education. They cannot wait. Our adults have also the right to develop through it. As policy makers we need to believe that this expansion and development project may become possible. As Portuguese poet Miguel Torga says so beautifully: "É uma ponte de sonho que te lanço... Passa por ela, irmão!" . "Brother, I am offering to you the bridge of a dreâm: Can you cross it?"

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